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ABSTRACT

Available research and program studies were reviewed to determine the following: the current state of adult literacy programs serving welfare recipients, educational strategies that have proved successful in training and placing welfare recipients and moving them into the job market, and ways of restructuring education programs to improve the success of welfare reform. Among the main findings of the review were the following: (1) half of all welfare recipients present challenges (such as unrecognized learning disabilities and personal/family problems) that cannot be overcome through typical short-term interventions; (2) traditional adult literacy programs have had difficulty attracting, retaining, and producing substantial and long-lasting gains for welfare recipients; and (3) those adult literacy programs that have been successful in helping welfare recipients have integrated basic skills instruction with occupational training and have been tailored to participants' specific needs and challenges. It was concluded that the education/retraining components of federal/state welfare reform proposals should make allowance for the diversity of the welfare population and that adult literacy and skills training programs should address noneducational barriers to employability such as low self-esteem, unstable housing, and severe family problems, and integrate adult literacy instruction with the education of adult learners' children. (MN)

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BRIEF

Literacy and Welfare Reform: Are We Making the Connection?

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KEY FINDINGS:

- One fourth of the welfare population has the skills to succeed in the labor market; another fourth needs a modicum of job training and basic skills upgrading. The remaining half, however, presents challenges (unrecognized learning disabilities, personal and familial difficulties, etc.) that cannot be overcome through the typical, short-term intervention.
- Given the diversity of the welfare population, focusing on processing the largest number of individuals into the labor market in the shortest time will work only for the 25-50% who are already job-ready or nearly so. The rest could fall through the cracks.
- Traditional adult literacy programs have found it difficult to attract, retain, and produce substantial and long-lasting gains for welfare recipients. The programs that have worked are those that (a) integrated basic skills instruction with occupational training and (b) were tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the participants.
- Among the nontraditional approaches, programs that educate and train welfare parents and improve their children's school readiness are gaining ground as instructional methods. These programs aim not only to lift current welfare recipients out of dependency, but also to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The education and retraining components of federal and state welfare reform proposals need to take into account the diversity of the welfare population and not just focus on the already or nearly employable. Each subgroup of welfare recipients requires different strategies and approaches; hence, a continuum of services should be provided.
- Literacy and skills training programs should also address other barriers to employability, namely, poor health, unstable housing, low self-esteem, and severe family problems. One-stop, single-site programs that provide multiple services are one promising alternative, especially if intensive case management services are made available to coordinate them.
- Literacy, family circumstances, skills training, and job placement all go together. Literacy is best taught to welfare recipients when it is functionally related to skills training and when it is integrated with the education of their children.

INTRODUCTION

Although there is a new, bipartisan consensus that welfare mothers should be required to work, it is also generally acknowledged that most do not have the education, literacy levels, or job experience needed to enter the work force. The federal and state governments, therefore, have been initiating programs to provide welfare mothers with basic education and job training. Yet, welfare reform debates have generally failed to deal with what kinds of education and training recipients need to get out and stay out of public assistance. This, in turn, is probably a reflection of the following characteristics of the patchwork of federal adult literacy programs currently operating: (a) disorganization and poor funding; (b) the failure to produce the necessary skills gains; and (c) the failure to address other barriers to labor market success.

This report looks into the current state of adult literacy programs serving welfare recipients, highlights the educational strategies that have proved successful in training and placing welfare recipients

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in the job market, and recommends ways to restructure education programs in order to make welfare reform successful.

METHODOLOGY

This is a review of research and program studies that is designed to promote an exchange of information and discussion between the fields of adult literacy and human services. In the process, it addresses the following questions: (a) To what extent have literacy programs served the welfare population and how successful have they been? (b) What are the most promising approaches to engaging this population and providing them with appropriate instruction and support? (c) To what extent do literacy programs focus on the family unit as the context for effective literacy instruction? and (d) What have been some of the barriers to successful linkages between adult literacy and human services and how have they been overcome?

The report begins with a discussion of definitions and terms in the field of adult literacy. It then gives an overview of the literacy levels of the American population, federal literacy programs in progress, and new approaches to literacy that have been successfully tried out in pilot programs. Two-generation, family literacy programs are then discussed.

The next three parts of the report discuss (a) lessons learned from field demonstrations, (b) the difficulties in bringing together adult education and welfare, and (c) the common features of current welfare reform proposals and their implications for the welfare population. The report concludes with this recommendation to policymakers: Given the welfare population's diversity in terms of job preparedness, adult education systems need to be substantially redesigned if they are to succeed in preparing welfare recipients to enter the labor market.

IMPLICATIONS

If welfare reform is to succeed in training and placing welfare recipients in the job market, basic education and literacy services for both teenage and older welfare mothers will need to be fundamentally redesigned.

Many job training programs operate sequentially; that is, adult basic education strictly precedes job training. This approach is unlikely to pull welfare mothers out of dependency because it overlooks special difficulties that are not amenable to traditional, short-term interventions. Hence, federal and state welfare reform programs should offer a continuum of services in order to meet each individual's needs. One such service is instruction that employs functional contexts (e.g., using a repair manual for literacy instruction). Another is to offer more intensive, individualized, family-based instruction.

Given today's budgetary limitations, such a collaborative restructuring of welfare and education programs would require making delicate decisions about targeting, the phasing in of reforms, and the scheduling and imposition of time limits on public assistance and instruction.

FURTHER READING

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